

Timothy Matlack
(1730 – 1829)
by Dr. Joseph M. Vitolo

When someone thinks of the Declaration of Independence, a beautifully penned calligraphic document usually comes to mind. However, did you ever wonder who penned that beautiful specimen of our country's history? Historians believe Timothy Matlack was the man chosen to engross the Declaration of Independence after the first draft was penned by Thomas Jefferson. Official documents of the time were usually engrossed, i.e. copied in large, clear script/text. Timothy Matlack was born in Haddonfield, NJ in 1730. He was a Quaker who spent a majority of his life in Pennsylvania.

Handwriting in the colonial period was heavily influenced by Europe, in particular England. Indeed, examining the script used by Matlack in the Declaration of Independence one can easily see these influences. In particular, his use of English roundhand script stands out. This form of script was executed with a feather quill pen and was actually of form of handwriting. The script is known today as Copperplate.

In the 1780's Matlack became a delegate to the Continental congress representing Pennsylvania. He was also known to be a sword toting patriot around the streets of Philadelphia. Interestingly, historians also identify Matlack as the person who penned George Washington's commission as commanding general of the Continental Army. Timothy Matlack died near Hornesburg, PA in 1829 at the incredible age of 99.